

Analysis

Item 12: Department of Forestry

2020 Fire Season

Analyst: Matt Stayner

Request: Allocate \$14,281,798 General Fund from the special purpose appropriation made to the Emergency Board for the state's wildfire recovery, prevention, and preparedness activities for the purpose of funding the state's remaining portion of the estimated net cost for the 2020 fire season.

Analysis: The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) brought forth a letter to the Emergency Board in December 2020 detailing the financial cost of the 2020 fire season to the agency. The letter presented the gross fire costs on ODF protected lands, the estimated recoveries from partner agencies, estimated cost reimbursements under the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Fire Management Assistance Grants, and the estimated net costs to the state. Of those net costs, \$10,068,842 was allocated for funding through the Oregon Forest Land Protection Fund. The remaining \$39,281,798 was allocated to the General Fund. During the December 2020 meeting of the Emergency Board, \$25.0 million General Fund was allocated to ODF. This request simply asks that the Emergency Board allocate the remaining portion of the allocated costs.

Legislative Fiscal Office Recommendation: The Legislative Fiscal Office recommends that the Emergency Board allocate \$14,281,798 General Fund from the special purpose appropriation made to the Emergency Board during the 3rd special session of 2020 for the state's wildfire recovery, prevention, and preparedness activities to the Department of Forestry for the purpose of funding the state's remaining portion of the estimated net cost for the 2020 fire season.

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Department of Forestry
Klein

Request: Allocate \$14,281,798 from the State Emergency Fund for the state's remaining portion of net large fire costs for the 2020 fire season.

Recommendation: Approve the request with the following modification: Allocate \$14,281,798 from the special purpose appropriation for the state's wildfire recovery, prevention, and preparedness activities for the remaining portion of net large fire costs for the 2020 fire season.

Discussion: Gross large-fire costs for the Oregon Department of Forestry for the 2020 fire season are estimated at nearly \$134 million with net large-fire costs of approximately \$49.3 million. Of the net costs, the Department has already received \$10 million from the Oregon Forest Land Protection Fund. The remaining \$39.3 million is the General Fund portion of net large-fire costs. During the December 11, 2020 meeting of the Emergency Board, the Department received \$25 million in funding and was directed to request the remaining funds when available. The Third Special Session of 2020 established a special purpose appropriation for the state's wildfire recovery, prevention, and preparedness activities and this request is for the remaining amount for the estimated 2020 fire season costs from that special purpose appropriation.

Legal Reference: Allocation of \$14,281,798 from the State Emergency Fund, set aside by the special purpose appropriation under section 3, chapter _____, Oregon Laws 2020 (third special session) (Enrolled Senate Bill 5371) to supplement the appropriation made by chapter 664, section 1(2), Oregon Laws 2019, for the Oregon Department of Forestry, Fire Protection Division for the 2019-21 biennium.



Oregon

Kate Brown, Governor

Department of Forestry

State Forester's Office

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January 4, 2021

The Honorable Senator Peter Courtney, Co-Chair
The Honorable Representative Tina Kotek, Co-Chair
State Emergency Board
900 Court Street NE
H-178 State Capitol
Salem, OR 97301-4048

RE: 2020 Fire Season Funds Request

Dear Co-Chairpersons:

Nature of the Request

The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) respectfully requests permission to appear before the State Emergency Board at its January 2021 meeting for the purpose of:

1. Requesting \$14,281,798 of General Fund for the state's remaining portion of net large fire costs for the 2020 fire season. This amount is what remains of the General Fund portion of net fire costs of for the 2020 season less the \$25 million allocated in the December 2020 Emergency Board.

Agency Action

Fire season 2020 to date

Oregon's complete and coordinated wildfire protection system—consisting of ODF, landowner partners, agency cooperators, and the fire contracting community—operated under historical conditions this year. Despite significant drought conditions in parts of the state, fire activity began as predicted for an average fire season. The Mosier Creek Fire started on August 12, two miles south of Mosier. This was the first fire in Oregon that was eligible for a FEMA Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG), with eight primary residences and more than 30 other structures lost in the first burn period of wind-driven fire activity.

In mid-August a five-day statewide lightning event with high winds and increased temperatures dramatically increased fire risk. The White River Fire west of Wamic started on August 17th. While not initially on ODF-protected lands, heavily timbered drainages with steep slopes challenged containment. The fire pushed into ODF-protected lands, resulted in evacuations, and became the second FEMA FMAG-eligible fire of the season. On August 19, 2020, Governor Brown declared a statewide state of emergency due to the imminent threat of wildfire. This declaration made Oregon National Guard (ORNG) resources available for firefighting. National Guard mobilizations included aviation resources, wildland firefighters, and personnel and equipment for traffic control checkpoints.

Fire prevention was a primary focus throughout fire season. There were multiple coordinated public outreach campaigns with our key fire prevention partner, Keep Oregon Green, and our local, state, and federal partner agencies. The Oregon Department of Transportation helped raise the awareness of thousands of drivers statewide by posting extreme fire danger warnings on their highway reader boards.

Early detection and initial attack success by ODF firefighters, supported by severity resources funded by a Special Purpose Appropriation (SPA) from the General Fund and the Oregon Forestland Protection Fund (OFLPF), resulted in 95% of fires being stopped at 10 acres or less. Resource availability has a significant impact on suppression success. Having the funding to proactively stage key firefighting resources statewide helps us keep fires small and protect the health and safety of the communities we serve. Additionally, the new aircraft-mounted infrared camera that was funded through OFLPF's strategic investment program also played a critical role in keeping fires small by helping us detect them earlier.

Prior to Labor Day, ODF responded to 752 fires and 17,069 acres of ODF protected lands burned. The number of fires was slightly below the 10-year average of 783, and acres burned was well below the 10-year average of 40,930 acres for the year to date.

Atop conditions of multi-year drought and historically low fuel moistures and humidity, the National Weather Service issued a red flag warning starting on Labor Day. This warning serves to make people aware that local conditions are ideal for wildfires to start and spread rapidly. A strong cold front arrived in the early evening hours of September 7th, with east-northeast winds at sustained speeds of 20 to 30 mph, and gusts typically from 50 to 60 mph. This was the strongest three-day east wind event during fire season since at least 1950. Gusts reached 106 mph at Timberline Ski Area, 66 mph at Silver Falls, and 51 mph in Astoria.

Hit first by the frontal winds were the wide range of active fires from northeast and central Oregon to Klamath. The first new large fire on the landscape was the 242 Fire near Chiloquin, which immediately prompted evacuations and ODF Incident Management Team 2 was ordered to manage the incident. This was the first of fourteen fires connected to the Labor Day wind event that was approved as a FEMA FMAG-eligible fire, and the third of the fire season. It burned 14,468 acres.

With wind gusts reaching over 60 miles per hour, the Beachie Creek Fire threatened thousands of structures along the Highway 22 corridor in the Santiam River Canyon, and burned 193,566 acres. This fire would end up destroying our North Cascade District's Santiam Unit Office, in addition to many homes, commercial buildings, and other structures. The Lionshead Fire crested over the Cascades from Warm Springs and spread all the way to the eastern flanks of the Beachie Creek Fire, and totaled 204,586 acres. The Riverside Fire near Estacada went from ignition to 110,000 acres in just a day and a half, and ultimately burned 138,151 acres. On the coast, the Echo Mountain Complex started near Lincoln City and burned 2,522 acres as it pushed nearly to the ocean.

The Holiday Farm Fire destroyed or threatened multiple communities along the Highway 126/McKenzie River corridor and burned 173,393 acres. The Archie Creek Fire burned 131,596 acres and resulted in the evacuation of Glide. The 2,977-acre Almeda Fire that spanned from north Ashland

to south Medford, burning through the communities of Phoenix and Talent, caused the greatest structure loss, as it burned almost completely in an urban environment. Despite extreme fire weather, the South Obenchain Fire was kept to 32,671 acres, but still posed a significant threat to Shady Cove, Butte Falls, and Eagle Point.

At the time of the Labor Day wind event, the national fire preparedness level (PL) was five, and had been since August 19th. PLs change based on resource availability and large fire potential. The Pacific Northwest Region (Oregon and Washington) increased its PL to five on September 8, where it remained for 17 days. Counting the deployments to the state Emergency Coordination Center to assist with Oregon's response to the pandemic, ODF mobilized its three IMTs 11 times this year. In all, Pacific Northwest teams were mobilized 53 times this fire season, and the region hosted seven teams from other areas in the nation. During peak fire activity, over 7,500 personnel from across the nation and Canada were assigned to fires in Oregon.

Unique in Oregon's fire protection system, is our robust capacity of local forest landowner and operator resources who train with ODF on an annual basis to be prepared to respond to fires as needed. Over 350 local resources (mainly dozers and excavators) immediately responded to these fires. The equipment was led by over 650 landowner and operator personnel trained in wildfire response. This resource is an asset available to Oregon and is unlike any other state. It is this type of response from all Oregonians that allowed us to quickly establish over 1,500 miles of control lines on these fires.

Sixteen fires in Oregon are eligible for FEMA FMAG funding with 14 of these fires being part of the Labor Day wind event: Beachie Creek, Lionshead, Holiday Farm, Powerline, Echo Mountain Complex, Almeda, Archie Creek, Riverside, South Obenchain, Pike Road, Slater (spread to Oregon from Northern California), Clackamas County/North Cascades Complex, and Chehalem/Bald Mountain. Prior to 2020, the most FEMA FMAG fires Oregon experienced was six in a given season. The Labor Day fires also qualified for a Presidential Disaster Declaration and a Major Disaster Declaration. These fires also contributed to numerous Conflagration Act declarations, activating OSFM incident management teams and taskforce deployments, as well as activating over 375 ORNG firefighters and training an additional 250 new ORNG firefighters.

Across all wildland fire jurisdictions in Oregon, as of October 19, 2020, approximately 2,045 fires burned approximately 1.28 million acres to date. On ODF's protection responsibility of 16.2 million acres, 920 fires burned approximately 541,822 acres. For context, ODF's ten-year average is 918 fires and 41,426 acres burned. ODF's acres burned drives the state's financial exposure for suppression costs including to the GF, OFLPF and insurance policy. The 2020 fire season experienced an unprecedented number of acres burned, evacuations, structure, economic and resource loss, and civilian loss of life.

As a result of these fires, along with fires in Washington and California, Oregon experienced the worst air quality seen in modern times. Air Quality Index numbers were regularly in the 300-500 range, which is considered hazardous. The worst of the air quality lasted about eight days. City, county, tribal, state, and federal agencies coordinated and aggregated the wildfire smoke information on Oregon's smoke blog to keep communities informed.

Action Requested

General Fund and Additional Costs Request Summary

The Department spent a significant amount in 2020 to suppress fires to protect natural resources, communities, and Oregonians. Experience has shown us the importance of a diverse large-fire funding system to respond to seasons like this one. The system created over time with the support of landowners, the Legislature, and the Governor's Office involves a shared financial responsibility among landowners, the state's General Fund, and a \$25 million insurance policy, the only one of its kind nationally.

Gross large-fire costs for the 2020 season are estimated at \$133,936,334 (*Attachment A*). Net large-fire costs are estimated at \$49,306,763. Since 2013, our average gross costs have escalated from approximately \$10 million to \$70 million annually.

ODF respectfully requests that the Emergency Board support the following fire season funding requests as per the Legislative Fiscal Office analysis and recommendation dated December 11, 2020:

- Allocate \$14,281,798 General Fund for the state's remaining portion of the estimated net large-fire costs for the 2020 fire season. This amount is the total net cost of \$49.3 million minus \$10 million the department has already received from OFLPF's obligation and less the \$25 million the department received at the December 2020 Emergency Board for a portion of the General Fund's obligation.

Legislation Affected

HB 5019, Chapter 664, section 1(2), Oregon Laws 2019

Thank you for your consideration. Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,



Peter Daugherty
Oregon State Forester
(503) 945-7211

cc: Jason Miner, Governor's Office
Oregon Board of Forestry
Matt Stayner, Legislative Fiscal Office
Renee Klein, Chief Financial Office

Attachment A ODF Gross Large Fire Costs

